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The Last Tomolo

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Tomolos were the large picturesque canoes made by the Indians of the Santa Barbara Channel and the off-shore islands. The tomolos were the only canoes made by any of the California Indians. Some historians think that perhaps they got the idea from the Aleuts, who are known to have raided the California coast as far south as Mexico. Undoubtedly some of the Aleuts, intrigued by the climate, stayed here and added their blood and culture to the native stock.

The tomolos were described by Cabrillo when he sailed through the Santa Barbara Channel in 1542. They were large enough to carry twelve men, or more, pointed at both ends, and propelled by paddles. They were made of planks, which were of random lengths and widths. The Indians split the planks from driftwood, using any kind of wood that they could split and work with their stone wedges and obsidian knives. After laboriously fitting and shaping each piece, small holes were drilled along the edges and the plank literally was sewed in place with thongs. The finished tomolo is said to have had neither ribs nor framework. When finally sewed together, it was coated with tar, of which there were numerous deposits along the coast.

An interesting thing about the tomolos is that, in addition to being the only canoe made by California Indians, they were the only craft made in North America by this same unique method. Similar boats were found along the coast of Peru.

The result was a fast and seaworthy canoe. Cabrillo reports that the Indians had no trouble in keeping abreast of and even passing his sailing ships on their trip up the Channel. The channel Indians were expert fishermen and relied on the ocean for a large part of their food. The tomolos made is possible for them to go far out to sea in search of fish.

It is known that they ventured as far out as San Nicolas and San Clemente Islands. They carried on a regular commerce with all of the Channel Islands, as well as up and down the coast. Most of the Indian mortars and pestles found along the Channel coast are made of rock which the tomolos brought from Catalina Island. At least a large part of the white



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flint arrowheads found in California were made of flint brought from Santa Cruz Island. Many of them were made on the island.

I have visited many times what we called the Indian mines on Santa Cruz. These mines were large holes, big enough to bury an automobile, where the flint had been dug out of the surrounding volcanic rock. Lying about were innumerable broken and imperfect arrowheads as well as the chips flaked off in making the same.

The tomolos were used for a few years even after the Indians had been herded off to the missions and put to work at various occupations. Some may have been used to supply the missions and soldiers with fish.

Probably one of the last places that they were made and used was at Dos Pueblos near Goleta. It was from here that what was probably the last tomolo in existence came, according to the story told me by at least three old vaqueros who worked under me on Santa Cruz Island.

In the 1830s, the Indians at some of the missions, including Santa Barbara, revolted. It was a peaceful revolt in that the Indians, becoming tired of hard work, coarse food, and being locked in unventilated barracks at night all for the doubtful benefits promised them in the hereafter, just walked away.

This was followed by the hunting down and savage killing of Indians by drunken soldiers. A butchery that the Padres were unable to prevent although they tried.

Most of the Indians fled to the hills and some even crossed the mountains and never returned. Excepting for a handful, mostly old people, those living

around Goleta were among the Indians who fled inland. The tomolos on the beach rotted away, were buried in the sands, or swept to sea by storms. Today a specimen of a tomolo reasonably intact would be worth a fortune.

In the 1860s and '70s, and probably earlier, vaqueros were already going out to the Channel Islands to round up cattle and shear sheep that had been allowed to multiply in a semi-wild condition. Among these were the old men from whom I heard this story.

When they and their companions landed at Prisoners Harbor on Santa Cruz Island, probably in the late '60s or early '70s, an old Indian in a canoe that they described as being very large, made of different sized planks, patched with skins and tar and all sewed together with thongs, paddled down to Prisoners Harbor from his camp a few miles east of that place. He greeted them with "Mielquieres" meaning in his broken Spanish, "I want honey", as he no doubt had greeted other Spaniards when they came to the island. He was already known as Mielquieres by the vaqueros who had met him on earlier trips.

As time went on and they saw Mielquieres on subsequent visits to the island, they gathered his story bit by bit. He had been taken from Santa Cruz Island together with his parents when he was a very small child. They were taken to the Mission and became mission Indians. He remembered very little about the Island.

Before his parents died, they had told him many stories about their old home and always longed to return to it and the old life before the coming of the Spaniards. Mielquieres grew up with the same longing to leave the mission and to return to the island.

When the Indians revolted, or shortly thereafter, instead of going into the back country or attaching himself to some rancho, as so many Indians did, he went to the vicinity of Goleta. There he took one of the abandoned canoes and paddled over to Santa Cruz Island, where he had lived ever since. His food consisted of fish, birds, seals, acorns, etc.

His description as given me was that of an old man of medium height, powerfully built, with long hair. His body and clothes reeked of fish and seal oil. He wore mostly cast off clothing he had begged from the Spanish and had patched with skins. He lived in a small grass and tule hut at a spot a few miles east of Prisoners Harbor, which is to this day called Mielquieres.

After hearing this tale, I rode over to where his camp had been with Quate Espinoza. He showed me the approximate location and we both searched for some sign, such as a depression in the ground, foundation work, or mortars and pestles, but we found none. Probably others had carried off any relics that he might have left.

As to his ultimate fate, nobody knew anything. They saw him over a period of a few years on their infrequent visits to the island, when he came to the harbor saying "Mielquieres". After that they never saw him again. His tule and grass hut fell down and rotted away.

Probably Mielquieres and his tomolo were wrecked in one of the sudden squalls that come up on the Channel. I like to think that he and his tomolo,

which was undoubtedly the last of its kind, were washed ashore and buried in the sands of his beloved island, to which he was the only one of his race ever to return.

AUTHORS FOOTNOTE

I make no claim as to the historical correctness of the above story. An historian could probably punch it full of holes and any one who wants to is welcome so to do.

It is based on the stories of old men who claimed to have known Mielquieres, the dates of the founding of the Mission, the revolt of the Indians, and his probable age when my friends knew him. They all dove-tail pretty well, including the location on the island that still goes by the name Mielquieres. It is a legend that I like to believe.